

PING PONG...THERE IS A POINT

Romans 3

We continue in Romans, but before I press into chapter 3 of that letter, let me continue with some thoughts about the Psalms. Why, you might ask? Because as I read this legal brief of Romans, it can be so well reasoned, so well argued, so left-brained that I need the Psalms to center me. Many of the Psalms, such as Psalm 51, are laments. Laments are when the person is pouring out his heart to God. Remarkably, almost every Psalm that is a lament ends with a positive statement about God. This is a classic structure to the Psalms, and might I suggest it should be, and could be, for our lives. We have dark moments, moments of despair, but in the end we hold onto our faith in God.

The reality of those dark moments, the evil that is in the world, in spite of God's faithfulness to all of humanity, is what Paul has been talking about. Let's review: In the previous two chapters, I asked two questions:

1. Do you think the world has largely forsaken God?
2. Do you think we get right with God by keeping the law...all of it, which includes not judging others?

Another way to look at the first two chapters is that in verses 1:18-32 Paul describes the blatant unrighteousness of much of the world, and in 2:1-16 he comments on the hypocritical righteousness of moralizers (those are the people who judge others). This string of Paul's logic is what led me to ask the question, "Do you think the world has largely forsaken God?" Because outside of the small population of Jews in the world, this

is how Paul views the majority of earth's population. Substitute Christian for Jew and ask yourself, "Do you view it that way?"

He then turns his attention to the law keepers, that would be the Jewish people. Yet Paul aptly points out in 2:17-3:8 that while the Jewish people have self-confidence, there is an anomaly; they boast of God's law, but they break it (this, by the way, is not a new thought, Jesus was constantly pressing this point).

All of this brings us to chapter 3. I titled this chapter "Ping Pong" in part because of the back-and-forth chatter of Paul. Some of us are not used to this rhetorical method. It is a method that tries to ask and answer questions that might come to the readers mind. It is a little like the writer saying, "Now I know you are going to point out A, but I have already thought of that by B." It leads to a lot of back-and-forth writing. But like a ping pong match, there is a point and it is going somewhere. Let's break it down a bit.

In verse 3:1 he asks a question that is based on the first two chapters. So if all of us are in the wrong, is there any advantage of being a Jew? His answer is absolutely! Consider an example: Have you ever been entrusted to do something — maybe the Best Man or Maid/Matron of Honor at a wedding? The Best Man is to bring the rings and both give toasts at the reception. He derives no benefit from these tasks. People in these positions have honor while in those roles, and once done their position of esteem is a bit less. Another example would be delivering something of great value. You have it, but it is not yours because your job is to give it to the person awaiting its delivery. If you keep it you are stealing. The Jews have been entrusted with the message of God, to be a light to all, to point the way to God. They have failed. They have not only kept the message for themselves, not only have the nations not

received it, but the people of those nations (the Gentiles) have deduced a completely wrong view of God. He then goes into a back-and-forth discussion about whether the failure of those entrusted somehow diminishes God; the answer is, of course, no.

In a ping pong match, every now and then there is a big swing, and verse 9 is just that. In verse 1 he says it is good to be a Jew. In verse 9 he asks, “Are we Jews any better off?” His answer, “No!” You might be thinking, “Wait a minute, you just said in verse one...” Here is where we need to slow down and see the distinction between the “privilege and responsibility” found in verse 1, to the idea of favoritism found in verse 9. God shows no favoritism to the Jewish people when it comes to whether they are measuring up to God’s standard; they do not get a pass, as it were. In verses 9-20 Paul lays it out for them in classic rabbinic style. In verses 10-18 he strings together a variety of Scriptures—which the Rabbis would do—to make his point. He draws on Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah making three points about sin: it is ungodly, pervasive, and universal. He writes in verse 20 that if you think you have the law on your side, you are greatly mistaken.

Up to this point, Paul has spent his time making one point very forcefully. He has rounded up all of creation and proclaimed that “all have fallen short of the glory of God.” No one can stand before God and pass muster on his or her own. In verse 19 he uses a phrase that has to do with the period he lived in. When a person was in court, when he had nothing left to say for himself, he took his hand and put it over his mouth, he stopped his mouth.

We are now turning into the beginning of the solution. Before we do let me outline what Paul, like many in his day, is wrestling with,

and with the outline of these questions in hand you might consider re-reading verses 3:21-31.

We have established the universality of sin, we have established that God granted to Israel the Promises and law, but they failed. Given this situation:

- How can God be just or be in the right?
- How can he at once be faithful to the Covenant with Abraham and the law, and at the same time do what is just to those who have not kept the Covenant and law?
- Further, how can he deal with evil on the one hand and rescue the helpless (the helpless sinners) on the other?
- If God is so smart, then why did he create such a situation?

Here comes the big swing in the ping pong match: His answer is Jesus.

As you read verses 21-31, you will see his answer to the questions I framed above. The law and the prophets testified to Jesus, yet Jesus, is apart from it. God's righteousness is shown through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. All are justified, made right before God, because God has fulfilled all that the law demands for sin through the blood of Jesus Christ, and it is all done by God so that we may not boast. In fact the worst that evil has, death, is defeated.

I know this has been a chapter of ping pong, and one which really has built upon the first two chapters, but I pray it was worth it. Take some time and re-read some sections if that will help you.

I ended the first two chapters each with a question to help you keep with the flow. Rather than a question, let me just add a comment.

Paul has been showing that all of us are in the same boat, the boat of sin. He at the same time has been showing that God's law, while it is good, cannot save us because we cannot keep it. He then asks if this "Good and Smart God" that we proclaim has somehow painted himself into a corner, and then answers, "No" by showing how Jesus answers all the questions he has asked. There will be more on this, but I pray you are staying with it.